CHAPTER 3

The Memory Theatre of Giulio Camillo: Alchemy, Rhetoric, and Deification in the Renaissance

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In the sixteenth century, just as print culture was simultaneously extending and undermining its importance, and just as renowned intellectuals – from Erasmus to Rabelais – were subjecting it to virulent criticism and satire, the art of memory is, as it were, born anew and actually experiences its moment of greatest splendor.\(^1\) The secret of this paradoxical situation lies in the fortunate encounter between the art of memory and the chief aspects of the new culture of the sixteenth century: from the flowering of arts and letters to the rebirth of hermeticism and Lullism, the interest in magic, astrology and the Cabala. The way the human mind functions, in particular its capacity to produce images, ceases to appear, as in medieval thought, a sign of its weakness, becoming rather a proof of its creative capacity and divine nature. To the man who knows how to attune himself to the profound structure of the cosmos, unlimited possibilities are opened. He may attain universal knowledge and thus make himself similar to God, since to know, to remember and to act on things are simply three different sides of an identical process.

The most typical exponent of the new phase of the art of memory in the sixteenth century is Giulio Camillo (ca. 1480–1544).\(^2\) As one of the most famous men of his time, he was by many celebrated as a divinity, by others viewed with suspicion as a mere charlatan. He travelled far and wide through Italy and France in search of patrons who might be willing to finance the Faustian dream of his life – the realization of a universal memory theatre in which one might store, and re-activate at will, all the knowledge contained in a universal mind.

Camillo’s theatre incarnated the dreams that characterized the literary and artistic explorations of his time, and precisely for this reason he attracted the attention of poets, painters and architects. He was included by Ariosto in the select company of princes, noble ladies and men of letters gathered together in the last canto of *Orlando Furioso* (to the exclusion of Machiavelli, who bitterly

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\(^2\) On Giulio Camillo, and for further bibliographic references, see Bolzoni, ‘Giulio Camillo’s Memory Theatre and the Kabbalah’.
complained of the slight). Camillo was a friend of writers such as Pietro Bem-
bo, and had close links with the circle of Pietro Aretino. Also intriguing are
the ties that he cultivated with various artists of the period, from the architect
Sebastiano Serlio to painters such as Lorenzo Lotto, Pordenone, Francesco Sal-
viati, and above all Titian, who not only executed a (now lost) portrait of the
philosopher but also painted many images for his memory theatre.

Camillo began his career as a master of rhetoric. He shared the classicist
ideals of his friend Pietro Bembo, who believed that in order to write well one
must imitate the great authors – Cicero and Virgil when writing in Latin, Pe-
trarch and Boccaccio when writing in Italian. According to Camillo, the imita-
tion of great literary models was an attempt to capture the idea of eloquence
that was present, even if in a partial form, in the works of the greatest masters.
Thus, rhetoric would be transformed into a metaphysical art which might teach
the reader how to ascend from the particular to the universal and conversely
how to descend from the universal to the individual. Whoever mastered this
art of rhetoric would be capable of manipulating words and rhetorical artifices
at will and subjecting them to an infinite variety of transformations. Camillo
included rhetoric among the three arts of metamorphosis, together with al-
chemy (the art of transforming physical objects) and deification (the art of
transforming the human mind into a divine one). We shall be returning to this
further on.

In order to imitate his literary models and create a system of variations on
them, Camillo applied a series of procedures based on two principles: the first
was the use of topical places, a traditional component of both rhetoric and
logic; the second was Ramon Lull’s clavis universalis. In his analysis of a literary
model, Camillo endeavoured to identify the device or artifice used and break it
down into its separate parts, each of which might lead the user back to an orig-
inal universal category (to the locus, or topical place). At this point he would
have before him all the possible combinations of arguments and artifices that
might be re-employed for a potential new text.

Thus, literary procedures also had a metaphysical dimension, and both were
closely intertwined with the techniques of rhetoric.

Similarly to his friend Pietro Bembo, as mentioned above, Camillo was con-
vinced that there existed a single path leading to the creation of beauty, and

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3 ‘E quei che per guidarci ai rivi ascri / mostra piano e più breve altro camino, / Iulio Camillo’
(Ludovico Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, 46,12, 5–7) Letter from Niccolò Machiavelli to Lodovico
Alamanni with the date of December 17, 1517, in Machiavelli, Tutte le opere, 948. Camillo’s
eulogy was added by Ariosto in the edition of 1532; Machiavelli expressed his indignation, in
his letter, that he was not included in the edition of 1516.